

MIDSUMMER DAY

The Nativity of St. John the Baptist—Customs and Superstitions of Midsummer Eve, Etc.

Today, the 24th of June, is considered as Midsummer Day, and this year the calendar and the almanac coincide, for the day is the longest of all the year, the sun at this latitude rising at 25 minutes before 4 o'clock and setting at 25 minutes after 8. This gives us fifteen hours and six minutes of daylight, to eight hours and fifty-four minutes of darkness.

The 24th day of June is likewise rendered a notable one by reason of its being the anniversary of the nativity of John the Baptist, whose festival as a saint is then celebrated, contrary to the general rule, which prescribes the anniversary of the death of a saint as the occasion for commemorating his virtues and ministrations while in the flesh. The day is, therefore, something more than an ordinary day, and demands something more than a passing notice at our hands.

Midsummer Eve. The commemoration of the nativity of St. John commenced on the previous evening, which, in truth, it was mainly confined. The people, anxious to fulfil the prophecy of Holy Writ, "Many shall rejoice in the birth of John the Baptist, were accustomed on the evening to go forth into the woods, where they made a large fire, and carried their children home to place about their doors, in token of manifestations of joy. Until within a recent period, this custom was universal throughout the land.

Towards evening, on the day preceding St. John's Day, it was also the custom to kindle a large fire, many should rejoice in the birth of John the Baptist, were accustomed on the evening to go forth into the woods, where they made a large fire, and carried their children home to place about their doors, in token of manifestations of joy. Until within a recent period, this custom was universal throughout the land.

Midsummer Day itself, although it was the occasion around which all the curious customs and superstitions above described were grouped, was not honored in ancient times with any marked celebration. Still, when near the first of June, in the belief that in this way the effects of thunder and all other noxious agencies in nature would be averted, at Magdalen College, Oxford, there was one special observance of the day which did not prevail elsewhere, and that was the regular annual preaching of a sermon from a stone pulpit in position on the right side of the College. The entire Court was set off with green boughs, "that the preaching might resemble that of the Baptist in the wilderness."

The following description of their personages at Melrose Abbey is taken from "Wade's History of Melrose." "Immediately after the election of officers for the year ensuing, the brethren wall in procession three times round the Cross, and afterwards dine together, under the presidency of the newly elected Grand Master. About six in the evening, the members again turn out and form in line two abreast, each bearing a lighted flambeau, and decorated with their peculiar emblems and insignia. Headed by the heraldic banners of the lodge, the procession follows the same route, three times round the Cross, and then proceeds to the Abbey. On these occasions, the crowded streets present a scene of the most animated description. The joyous strains of a well-conducted band, the waving torches, and incessant showers of fireworks make the scene a carnival. But at this time the venerable Abbey is the chief point of attraction and resort, and as the mystic torch-bearers thread their way through its mouldering aisles, and round the massive pillars, the outlines of its gorgeous ruins become singularly illuminated and brought into bold and striking relief. "The whole extent of the Abbey is with measured step and slow" some three times round. Still, when near the first of June, in the belief that in this way the effects of thunder and all other noxious agencies in nature would be averted, at Magdalen College, Oxford, there was one special observance of the day which did not prevail elsewhere, and that was the regular annual preaching of a sermon from a stone pulpit in position on the right side of the College. The entire Court was set off with green boughs, "that the preaching might resemble that of the Baptist in the wilderness."

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